

**Interview with Roxanne Rice and Anne Zimmer
of Food for Others
conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

May 5, 2008

Linda: Today is May 5, 2008 and I am Linda Bryne and I am at the offices of Food for Others with Roxanne Rice the Executive Director and the Food for Others facility is located at 2938 Prosperity Avenue, Fairfax, VA and I want to thank you for doing this interview Roxanne.

Roxanne: Our pleasure.

Linda: Will you tell us a little something about yourself and how you ended up here with Food for Others?

Roxanne: I am the first full time paid Executive Director at Food for Others and prior to my arrival, the organization was run exclusively by volunteers. I have kind an eclectic background and my most recent employment before coming to Food for Others was with the United Way and during the recent problems with United Way I was laid off and I started here with Food for Others. It was a great learning experience for my current job where I got to know many of the non-profits in the community and how Fairfax County primarily dealt with non-profits and the environment in which non-profits existed so it was a very good background for this particular job.

Food for Others as I said was a totally volunteer managed organization up until 2004 when I started. At that time the volunteers that had been long time volunteers and had been doing the day-to-day operation decided they were no longer able to do that. They had a new Board Chair coming in at that time and Zimmer said if I am going to be the Board Chair I have got to have a staff that will be able to do the day to day operation and that is how I was hired. She has now been the Board Chair for 4 years and will be relinquishing that lofty title in October of this year to a new Chair. So, as I said it has been a volunteer driven organization and still is. The volunteers

make us what we are because with only 7 ½ staff people at this time we would not be able to do the amount of work that we do.

Linda: Are you originally from this area?

Roxanne: No, I am from Arizona. I grew up in Tempe Arizona but I have lived here for 20 years in a different district, but very close by in the Braddock District but as I say I have lived here for 20 years.

Linda: Tell me about Food for others, when it started.

Roxanne: Food for Others was incorporated in 1995; it is an outgrowth of an organization and a lot of people that I run into. As a matter of fact even when I was working for the United Way I heard of the Founder in the previous organization, which was called Lazarus of the Gate and it operated out of the old Whittier, I think it was a middle school in Falls Church. That was a condemned school but they allowed Lazarus of the Gate to use it to distribute food with the understanding that eventually we would have to be moved elsewhere because they were going to tear down the school and use the land for something else.

Lazarus of the Gate was the child of a man by the name of George McMannom. It was his passion to provide food and other services to people in need. He was acquainted with a man who died of exposure as the story goes that I heard. I never met George myself but he was a famous person around and he thought at that time, about 20 or 25 years ago, he realized that a county as wealthy as Fairfax it was impossible for him to live without trying to help those people in need and that there was no reason we would not be able to help those around us in need. So he founded Lazarus of the Gate and found lots of volunteers who were willing to take on the work that they were doing. They set up a lot of the same programs that we are continuing to do the same today.

In 1994 or 1995 he realized that he was no longer going to be involved. A number of the volunteers realized they did not want to leave the people standing on the street corner sites. They had become acquainted with them, friendly with them and realized the need in the community for food

and the volunteers got together with the help and blessings of the County Government and decided to incorporate another organization. They decided on the name of Food for Others to be the new organization and established a founding Board and came up with by-laws and incorporated as a non profit and started to operate as Food for Others in October of 1995. 1996 the services were not that great but they have been going up ever since.

2001 was a year of real highlight for the organization, as it was for many people, because after September 11th the number of people that we served increased dramatically. At that time in October of 2001, two staff people were hired to work in the warehouse. We always had paid staff in the warehouse but they were not doing the management of the organization. But two more staff members were hired in 2001 to handle the great influx of new clients that we saw primarily for the USDA TEFAP program. A lot of the folks were service people, and services industries who received cut backs in their employment and income started coming to Food for Others for food.

We saw this large influx in 2001 and then we had more people in 2002 and 2003 and then it sort of leveled off even in 2004, 2005 and 2006, it was fairly level with maybe even a slight decrease in the number of clients coming to us. In fiscal year 2007 we saw a 17% increase of folks coming to the warehouse for food over the pervious year and we are seeing the increase in that much in this current fiscal year. We will know on June 30th what the impact of the current economic situation is on our services in terms of the number of clients.

Linda: You spoke previously about Lazarus of the Gate and meeting people on the street corner with people that needed to continue to be served, tell me about that.

Roxanne: We have several ways that we distribute food. In the warehouse we have the emergency referral program and a social worker can refer a person to Food for Others for an emergency supply of food. That is a good amount of food that is supposed to satisfy somebody that really has no food in their kitchen or pantry in order to feed their family.

A person can get three referrals a year under our current way of operating from a social worker. They can come back if they are qualified and don't exceed a limit on their income based on the Federal Government's guidelines for the USDA TEFAP program. Those are the two programs in the warehouse. Another very important way we distribute food is through our street corner sites. This street site program was started by George McMannom of the Lazarus at the Gate group. Between 5 and 6 o'clock Monday through Friday volunteers drive their vehicles to our warehouse and load up their personal cars with food that is gathered for them out of the storage in our warehouse and they take it out to the predetermined street corner sites, there are 14 of them currently. These were set up a long time ago and they are in low income housing areas. In Fairfax County there are two sites in Burke, one at Baileys, one at Colmar and there are other various locations throughout the county. They are not too far from the central location we do not go down US 1 unfortunately because the nature of the program makes it get difficult to get volunteers at the time of day that we do our distributions. So we make it about 5:00 or 5:30 to pick up the food and take it out to the street corner sites. People line up at the site and the only question asked of them is how many people are in your family and the reason we ask that question of them is because we have to report our numbers, how many people we are serving, how many families and how many individuals we report to Fairfax County because we received funding through the county. So the belief and theory behind the street corner sites is that number one they are located in low income neighborhoods and the other reason for asking for no identification and no verification for need is the feeling that if somebody is going to line up on a street corner to get free food they probably need that food. So that has always been the philosophy behind the street corner sites and I must say that our street corner sites or a number of them, the same volunteers have been doing them for even 20 years. It shows a real commitment on their part and it also demonstrates their belief that there is a need and they are doing a real service that is needed in the community.

Linda: So how many people would you say that you serve in a year?

Roxanne: Well, that is hard to say because we have the complication in our business of counting individuals.

[Interview paused]

Linda: This is a continuation of the Food for Others history and I am now with Ann Zimmer who is on the Chair for this program and she has joined Roxanne and myself. Welcome Ann I wonder if you would tell me a little something about yourself and how you became Chair?

Anne: Well let's see. I was a volunteer with Lazarus of the Gate before we became Food for Others. I was one of the group that came with the old regime and did not want to see the people standing on the corner waiting for food and no one show up. So that was the group of us and I don't know if you spoke about this or not. The county was very helpful and Jerry Connolly was very helpful in getting someone in here to actually run the organization for a while so there would be no stop for the families that were lining up.

Linda: So was this when Chairman Connolly was then Providence Supervisor?

Anne: Yes he was Providence Supervisor, so this would be his area and he stepped in and he has always been a friend of ours in that respect. Without the county's help quite frankly I don't know if we would have been able to pull it off because they got the warehouse. They actually had a county employee come in here and run the show until we got our act together, organizers and volunteers and so on in here to be running the day to day operation so I don't think we would be here without the county's help.

So I will tell you how I got involved in this, I am sure Roxanne mentioned that, but it was basically because my middle son had soccer practice at Draper's Lane Park, a little park in that area and when he got back in the car, I have three sons and he is the middle one, and the other two are there and all young at the time and he asked what I made for dinner and of course it is hard to complain when he heard what I made for dinner but I had not made it yet because I had been driving around the county. So, we

happened to be driving around the corner where people were being handed out groceries so my immediate comment was that those people were happy for what they were getting and we found out that was Lazarus at the Gate that were delivering to that street corner site, so as a family we became involved in delivering food and that was 20 years ago. He is now 27 and moved away and I am still doing it, but when they come home they still help out. My one son who is still at home helps out and once in a while I rope my husband into helping out. But, it is a good program and it has always been a good program, which is why I stayed with it for so long.

Linda: Do you get to recognize the people you help, tell me a little about that?

Anne: We have a very interesting site and I always felt that you could tell the hot spots in the world were by who appeared on our line. When Russia was going through breaking up with the US we had Russians on our line. We also had Afghans, Iranians, Iraqi's and Somalis so I always could see what was going on in the world by our ethnic group, it is a very multi cultured diverse group of different languages it is amazing, different clothing, different foods they would eat and want to eat. One of the interesting things about our site because you have some many differences in all the people that come there is there wasn't a whole lot of communication between them. The by products of us going there and delivering food is people showing up at 6 o'clock to get food and they actually start to talk to each other and communicate with each other as best they could, and actually watch out for each other. Somebody will bring food to another if they are sick and a lot of them are elderly women and we have lost a lot of the over the years, but people would watch over them when they were sick. And we thought wow, just by delivering food to street corners who would have thought we might be fostering a sense of community in that neighborhood which is a by product. We don't ever talk about things like that we talk about things like pounds in and pounds out and that is something that is not measurable but that is what is taking place on our street corner site and that is what I am most familiar with but I am sure it may be happening in some of the others as well.

Linda: Explain how this translates to the street corner, the adversity that might be happening in another country.

Anne: I think that and I don't know that this is the place that Fairfax County may put refugees in the initially but it is an area where there is Section 8 housing, people are getting help with their rent there so I think it may be an area where people will come to be resettled or they may have known someone that directs them there or through county services they directed them there? It is just interesting to see such a big mix. Sometimes you may have more of one ethnic group than another but this is a real mix. So, I am really not sure how they all came to be there but that would be my guess that the county helped them find a spot.

Linda: The many services that we have here in Fairfax County are not offered in other areas of the United States.

Anne: Through word of mouth they may have heard about Fairfax because of that that you will find the help you need. I don't know if it is through a resettlement program exactly but most of these people that are at our site came directly from their country to there. There are not many that moved from another place at least the ones that come for food, I am sure. There are other people at the site that I may not know or a complex that I don't know about, but the ones that come for food. Every now and again I use to feel like, my gosh people are coming for food and maybe we shouldn't be doing this because they are always coming for food and just when you reach that point something happens. I know this gentleman pulled me aside, he was Russian and spoke in broken English and said, I just want you to know that I was an Engineer on a power plant in Russia and I can't find a job and I am still working on finding a job and there are 11 people living in my apartment and we are so thankful because this is all we eat. Sooo, then I say okay this is why I am still here 20 years later. So sometimes you just get the stories. I don't ask for the stories. Rarely do we ask for stories and reluctantly we do so because you always feel as though you are invading somebody's privacy. But I think it is one of the things that we need to do better because people connect to the stories. I come back for a couple of years because that Russian family is relying on us. So it is interesting and as

I said I think it may be word of mouth why people come here but I don't think they would come if they did not need the help.

Linda: Well, before you joined us Roxanne was just going to tell us about how many you serve and how much food you disperse in a year.

Roxanne: The number of families we serve is hard to capture because people eat every day, so we have people who come to us multiple times during the year and some only one time during the year. I think it is most accurate to say we distribute about 2 million pounds of food a year, which roughly translates in our business to about 2 million meals a year. A pound is approximately equivalent to a meal. So we supply about 2 million pounds of food for 2 million meals a year. We have about 1100 families that come to the warehouse to receive services about once a month and that is pretty much a number that is unduplicated because they can only come once a month. On our street corner sites we feed about 250 families a week and those are many of the same families but that is approximately the number of different families that we see a week.

Anne: And the numbers are going up.

Roxanne: Another way we provide food is to what we call special groups and those are other organizations such as church pantries, after school programs where snacks are being provided to school children and we are providing some breakfast food for a school that have some children who qualify for free breakfasts, but because there are not enough kids in the program that qualify the church has gotten involved. The church then comes to us, picks up some cereal, fruit cups and some things takes them to the school and the social worker provides the free breakfast for some kids. There are other organizations such as the Mosque Dar El Hashra in Seven Corners and Saint Anthony's gets food from us to distribute the same way you do groceries. So we are providing food for some community based organizations that don't have a good budget to purchase the food or get it elsewhere. We are also providing food elsewhere to some organizations down on Rt. 1 where there is a lot of need. We don't have any street corner sites because of the distance for volunteers to take in the evening

but we feel also that we are helping down in the area of need by giving to UCM, Rising Hope and the Lorton Community Action Center down on US 1.

Linda: What is UCM?

Roxanne: United Community Ministries, which is one of the ecumenical groups that provide services in that part of Fairfax County.

Linda: You had mentioned a Federal program earlier.

Roxanne: TEFAP?

Linda: Could you tell us what that stands for?

Roxanne: Oh gosh.

Anne: I like USDA better it is easier.

Roxanne: Yes, the US Department of Agriculture TEFAP program. TEFAP stands for The Emergency Food Assistance Program. Another way people refer to it is the Cheese Program; remember they use to provide surplus cheese and various dairy products to low-income families. Well there really isn't cheese on the program anymore or any dairy products but the program has continued to provide surplus food to low income families and many of the clients who come to us once a month are coming just for the TEFAP program.

Anne: They have to income qualify for that program.

Linda: And the rest of your program they don't have to qualify unless they are through a?

Roxanne: Social worker tells us about their need and we give them a large supply of food because they are in a sort of emergency situation.

Linda: I wanted to mention that if any ambient noises come through on this interview because we are in the offices which are connected to the

warehouse facility and they are moving food even as we speak. Tell me what you would like people to know about your organization.

Anne: That we are here, we serve a lot of people and that we always need food. We give out free food therefore the goal is to find free food. There is a lot of surplus food in the community and there are a lot of people that will donate if they know you are around once they know what the need is. So almost every time when we asked when our shelves were bare and we put out an article that goes in the paper or we send out a letter the community has responded and we were just discussing this today in the relationships to our strategic planning to try and be most equitable in giving out the food to those who need it. How do you figure out the fairest way to do that for everybody? And, to give it out to the largest number of people in need and now with the increasing number of need, how much will this need go up in the future and how much food do we need to find to be able to fill that need. So I think for us it is always a constant battle to making sure there is enough food in the warehouse and to be able to get it to the people that we need to. So that is pretty much it and now we are here and they can come and volunteer with us as well.

Roxanne: Right now we are reading about the rising prices of food and that is affecting all of us when we go to the grocery store and of course fuel also is going up and that affects everybody when they go to the grocery store because they have to drive most of the time. That is also affecting us as an organization in terms of bottom line on our budget and we don't really know how or if it is going to affect the stores donations, donations to the Capillary Food Bank where we get a lot of our food or donations in food drives. We just don't know what the near future holds for us but it also most importantly affects the families that we are providing services to because they are living on the edge in the first place and then just throw in rising costs and it just makes their situation even harder. That is why we are seeing an increasing number of folks coming to us and asking for assistance.

Linda: How many volunteers do you have?

Roxanne: Well that also is a tricky question to answer. We have argued for years and years about how to count clients and how to count volunteers, the tricky part of that is we have volunteers, such as Anne, who have put in many hundreds of hours but we also have sometimes a volunteer who will come to work for two hours in the warehouse and we will never see them again. Both are providing excellent services so really the best way to count volunteers is by the number of volunteer hours they are providing to us over the course of the year in total. Last year FY 2007 ending on June 30, 2007, we had 26,286 volunteer hours, which comes to the equivalent of 12 full time employees. So obviously that is an important source of our work and allows us to do what we do on a small staff. You know what it is also a very important part of our mission. Our Mission Statement talks about providing free food to people in need in Northern Virginia, but the last sentence of our Mission Statement talks about providing the opportunity for people to become engaged in their community, so we feel seriously about what it is we are doing here both for our clients and for offering an opportunity for volunteers to come in and do something for their community. People love to get involved with this organization. We had some people come to us maybe 20 years ago but also people have come to us recently and keep coming back. They enjoy what they are doing and most of all they feel needed.

Anne: Did you mention that we are an all-volunteer organization up until four years ago as far as staff except for the warehouse which is pretty remarkable too for that many years it was run on all volunteer power on all these desks.

Linda: How large is your Board?

Anne: We are currently at 10 and that is about as small as we think should be especially right now with taking on a new strategic plan, there is a lot to do. We are looking for new Board members and we have been very fortunate in that area. That is the reason I have stayed around here for so long, we have always had things happen when you need them to happen. We had a Board member come on this year whose expertise is building and construction and we are looking at a renovation of the warehouse and it just happened and he is invaluable to us. He said he didn't think that was

what he would be doing when he came here but okay. I told him he came at the right time because it was just when we needed him to. Things like that have happened here. I often tell the story about our 10th Anniversary party. We never have parties so we decided to have one for our 10th Anniversary about 3 years ago I guess now and we wanted to keep the price down. We didn't want to have a fundraiser but just to have the volunteers old and new come together and have a meal and a party. We absolutely have never had a party, even our Board never had one we might get some sweets once in a while that came in that day but that is about it. So we planned this party, the group in Fairfax American Legion Hall gave us a good price on a dinner and of course we were not going to spend any money on flowers or anything like that. I said if we are going to spend money, it is going to be on food. So the day of the event boxes of brand new fresh roses and flowers, not even wilted usually if they come in they are saggy and things but these were straight up, perfect and pristine so we were like happy clams sitting there cutting up flowers and making flower arrangements for all the tables. I wanted to talk to them and make sure they knew we did not buy any flowers; they came in today because that is the kind of thing that happens here. We had no turkeys and an article will go in the paper that we need turkeys and food and swish it shows up. So the community has really responded when we have asked and it has been great and I hope it continues to be so and also things just happen so that is what keeps me coming here fun things like that.

Linda: Great. Well I don't think I have any other questions I wonder if you know of any I haven't asked that you would like everyone to know about?

Anne: Well I think this is kind of interesting because it does have the three different programs in the community and we have been visiting different groups like ours in other areas in Maryland and so on just to see how they are doing things and again working with our strategic plan tweaking our programs. Again I think we are kind of unique in some ways and part of it is because some of it has grown out of volunteers and what they have seen in the past and saw as a need that had to be filled and in how we do things. Is this how we do it, what about this, is this fair, let's do a check list -- really trying to balance that out which is an ongoing question all the time.

Linda: So the three programs are?

Anne: Street corner sites, the families that come to the warehouse directly for food and the special groups that Roxanne mentioned is a way for us to be out in the community without having to have staff out there all over the place. Again we do not have any social workers on staff we only do food here and I think we do it pretty well so it has kept us focused on one thing. At times I think should we do this? Should we have training programs? Delve into housing??? Even when we did our strategic plan people came back to us and said no you do food well, just stay with food because we know where to send people for that need. I feel as though we have found our niche in the community here.

Linda: Does food come before shelter?

Anne: There you go, I guess you are right. You just never know what is going to happen. I was on the street site one night and a women showed up in back of a car with a brand new baby and she had just come from the hospital and she had no food in her house and she was by herself, it was a cab actually that she was in and I gave her a bunch of food and she left and we never saw her again. That was a number of years ago but this young woman still haunts me, like where did she go? Did she have any kind of support system? Was that the only food she got? Did somebody help her after she went somewhere? So you just don't know the rest of the story but you are helping that person in that moment as you say with the most basic need there is. So that is what keeps us all here - basic need.

Linda: I want to thank you both for this interview. It has been most interesting.